

Executive Officer's Statement

May 22, 2007

The Virginia Tech shooting incident reverberated through the victim-assistance community nationwide. In the wake of this tragic event, we wanted to respond to heightened interest in the plight of victims of violent crime by informing Californians about resources available to crime victims. The following op-ed piece was distributed to newspapers throughout California in hopes that that it would both inform journalists and be considered for publication.

Article distributed to California newspapers on behalf of the Board

Virginia Tech Tragedy Underscores Importance of Protecting and Serving Crime Victims

California is a Leader in Assisting Victims, But Much Work Lies Ahead

By Rosario Marin

Secretary, California State and Consumer Services Agency
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Crime victim service providers were among so many Californians shocked by the Virginia Tech shooting tragedy. Our thoughts remain with the Virginia Tech victims, families, classmates and educators.

Though this horrific crime took place across the country, its lessons hit close to home.

The worst shooting incident of this kind in U.S. history demonstrates how tragically life can be altered. No matter how safe we may feel, how many precautions we take, we are all vulnerable to violent crime. It doesn't necessarily take a criminal with a gun; a drunk driver can cause similar mayhem.

The ordeal faced by surviving Virginia Tech victims and families is fundamentally the same as the challenge faced by victims of violent crime anywhere. The universal challenge for victims is recovering from physical, emotional and/or financial trauma.

Fortunately, California crime victims have had a state program to help them recover since 1965. During the past fiscal year, the California Victim Compensation Program approved more than 43,000 compensation claims and paid more than \$66 million for victim benefits.

Tax dollars aren't used for crime victim payments. The funds come from restitution orders, fines and penalties against state and federal criminal offenders. The program pays for medical and dental treatment, mental health services, income loss, funeral expenses, crime-scene cleanup, relocation and other expenses that aren't covered by insurance or other sources of reimbursement.

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Compensation is only one resource available to California crime victims. We can be proud of our state's legacy of victims' rights.

The Golden State can count many firsts, which include the establishment of the first compensation program in the nation in 1965, the first hospital-based rape treatment center, the first victim assistance program, and the first domestic violence center. In fact, California's leadership helped inspire the national victims' rights movement.

This year is the 25th anniversary of the California Victims' Bill of Rights, which was passed by voters in 1982. The Victims' Bill of Rights gave crime victims constitutional rights that include public safety being the top priority when setting bail, the right to speak at felony sentencing and parole hearings, and the right to restitution from the offender.

California's Victim Compensation Program is a leading state resource on restitution issues, working with counties and other state agencies to ensure the imposition of restitution orders and collections from offenders.

Despite these successes, there is much work left to do. One of our top priorities is reaching out to California crime victims who suffer in silence or who simply are not aware that Victim Compensation Program services are available.

The latest report on criminal victimization from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that 53% of violent crimes were never brought to the attention of law enforcement, and more than 60% percent of sexual assault crimes go unreported. Another bureau report shows teenagers are twice as likely to become victims of violent crime, but tend not to report the crime. The National Center on Elder Abuse reports more than 92% percent of elder abuse is unreported.

To reach these silent victims, we must overcome the barriers of disability, age, language, isolation and misunderstanding that keep them from achieving their rights.

Victims should be encouraged to report the crime to law enforcement. They can also get in touch with a local Victim Witness Assistance Center advocate in their county. Victims can seek assistance from domestic violence, sexual assault and other crisis centers. Victims can speak with their clergy, doctor, counselor or an attorney.

If you or someone close to you is a victim of violent crime, take that first step and seek assistance. California has many options and resources to help you.

Contact the California Victim Compensation Program toll-free at 800-777-9229 or find out more at www.victimcompensation.ca.gov.